Misanthropy and contemporary American filmmaking

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Gangs of New York, *directed by Martin Scorsese, written by Jay Cocks, Steven Zaillian and Kenneth Lonergan*

Gangs of New York is a dreadful film, poorly constructed, unconvincing and deeply misanthropic. It has been highly praised by a number of prominent critics in the US, including some who should know better. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* called it "a near-great movie," which "over time ... will make up the distance." According to the *Chicago Tribune*'s Michael Wilmington, "It's a movie of grand, reckless ambition ... burning with creative passion, overreaching, magnificently wild." Todd McCarthy in *Variety* writes that *Gangs of New York* "bears all the earmarks of a magnum opus for [director] Martin Scorsese." In *Time* Richard Corliss terms the work a "film epic" and argues that its failings do not "erase the splendor of Scorsese's congested, conflicted, entrancing achievement." David Edelstein of *Slate* writes: "Whatever its fate at the box office, it's a magnificent achievement."

Scorsese's film purports to treat ethnic and gang violence in New York City in the mid-nineteenth century and, according to its admirers, the birth of modern American society. The film begins in 1846, with a vicious battle between a collection of Irish gangs and their "Nativist" enemies, led by Bill "The Butcher" Cutting (played by Daniel Day-Lewis). Cutting strikes down his chief opponent, Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson), and the latter's young son is taken into custody. Sixteen years later, released from a reformatory, Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio) sets out to exact vengeance against his father's killer.

The youth works his way into the Butcher's gang, which now rules the crime-ridden Five Points neighborhood (in lower Manhattan), in an uneasy alliance with Boss Tweed (Jim Broadbent) of the Democratic Party's notoriously corrupt Tammany Hall. Amsterdam makes himself invaluable to Cutting and, along the way, falls in love with a female pickpocket, Jenny (Cameron Diaz). His first attempt at dispatching Butcher Bill by treachery having failed, nearly costing his life, Amsterdam decides to openly declare his identity and aims, resurrecting the name of his father's old gang. The final showdown between the two camps is interrupted by the bloody draft riots of July 13-16, 1863 (in which a section of the city's Irish immigrant population in particular rose up against Civil War conscription) and the Union army's attempts to suppress them. Amsterdam, however, manages to deliver a fatal blow.

From the opening images Scorsese depicts an animalistic world of cruelty and mayhem. Vallon and Cutting are portrayed as barbarian warlords, adhering to some semi-medieval code of honor. After the film has jumped forward to the 1860s, it lovingly and all-too painstakingly introduces the various ethnic-based gangs, categories of crime, species of criminal and prostitute, and so forth. Indeed, one might be forgiven for concluding that Scorsese, as he did in *The Age of Innocence*, has paid far more attention to decor and physical detail than to narrative and characterization. The banal plot is rather loosely and extraneously hung on this framework of alleged historical fact.

Certainly the drama is extremely weak. Scorsese has always seemed to adhere to the conviction, misguidedly drawn perhaps from his attraction to the French New Wave and other schools, that he was under no obligation to develop and sustain a coherent story. His work has never risen above, at its best, a cinema of strong characterizations, startling confrontations, no-holds-barred violence. One would be hard-pressed to bring to mind the sequence of events in *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas* or *Casino*, for example, much less enduring themes elaborated in those films.

In *Gangs of New York* the characters are tritely, predictably drawn and the events contrived. Despite all its furious goings-on, the film is almost entirely lacking in the spontaneity of real life. It is a giant, overwrought contrivance, a vehicle for communicating the filmmakers' murky and unappealing musings about society and human beings. There are moments in the film so removed from any basis in social or psychological reality, so arbitrary, either so *subjective* or so *malicious* (the opening images underground, the celebration marking the gang's victory over Priest Vallon, the clash between the volunteer fire companies) that one wonders which portion of the world and mankind the filmmakers' imagine they are representing. Even the look and feel of the film is false and unreal—an unpleasant yellowish glow stays in one's memory—and appears designed to emphasize the essential filthiness of humanity. This is reality organized to correspond to a preconceived notion, and an unhealthy one at that.

The lack of spontaneity reaches its high point in the figure of Bill the Butcher and the performance of Day-Lewis. Cutting is loaded down with significant attributes (handle-bar moustache, top hat, glass eye in the shape of an eagle, proto-New York accent—all in all, a comic book appearance), but he is essentially an empty abstraction, a walking conglomeration of what the screenwriters apparently take to be "native" American characteristics: brutality, stubbornness, racism and xenophobia, an abiding sense of honor, indefatigable energy, etc.

Amsterdam (a terrible name!) and Jenny are taken from templates: the rebellious, seething youth and the fiery whore with a golden heart, respectively. Outside of the clichés, there is almost nothing to them. Their romance is perfunctory and incidental and leaves one thoroughly unmoved.

The narrative in *Gangs of New York* simply does not hold together in any meaningful fashion. Why does Amsterdam Vallon, for example, work his way into Bill Cutting's good graces in the first place? Not to be in a position to murder him, because he bribes a Chinese waiter to do that, and he could just as easily have bribed the man without having had anything to do with Cutting's gang. If he is drawn to Cutting, or the filmmakers are, then that needs to be explained. Why should Vallon be attracted to this sadistic and racist thug, his father's killer, and why should we?

The character is based on a real-life figure, Bill "The Butcher" Poole (who operated on behalf of the "Nativist" Know-Nothing Party and died in 1855), a notorious and bloodthirsty gang leader whose specialty, according to one commentator, "seems to have been gutting rivals with carving knives." For their own reasons the filmmakers choose to turn Cutting into something of a philosopher-king, providing this sociopath as

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well with a deep sense of honor. In his most significant speech, draped in an American flag, he tells Amsterdam how much he admired the latter's father, concluding, "He was the only man I ever killed worth remembering. I never had a son. Civilization is crumbling. God bless you." The scene is absurd.

The initial murder plot hatched by Amsterdam against the Butcher is treated only in passing and its failure is thoroughly anticlimactic. Why should Cutting let Amsterdam off so easily after the attempt on his life? He then claims he will permanently maim the younger man—one fears the worst—but, in fact, does no such thing.

Much is made in the opening scenes of Priest Vallon's associates, who turn up 16 years later as a cohort of Cutting's, a policeman and a barber. One is led to expect that they will be confronted in some manner by Amsterdam and made to recognize or deny their betrayal of the Irish cause. Only one of them, Monk (Brendan Gleeson), even becomes aware of Amsterdam's true identity, and he, along with the rest, plays no role in the film's denouement. Their presence is simply one of the film's many red herrings.

And what of the peculiar denouement itself, the overshadowing and eventual disruption of the great gang battle by the draft riots? Scorsese sets himself the task of staging two full-scale bloody confrontations, which creates confusion more than anything else. Presumably he is making a point here, that modern industrial America, in the form of the mass warfare of the Civil War, is putting an end to the individualistic, warlord epoch, but the juxtaposition of events is incomprehensible. The relationship between the gang wars and the riots is never intelligibly established, nor is the attitude of Amsterdam and his associates toward the outburst, not a small matter.

Falsified history

Beyond the failings of the drama, moreover, there is the issue of the accuracy of the historical and social detail, which does not seem to have troubled any of the critics. The first thing that ought to strike any spectator is that no neighborhood like the one depicted in *Gangs of New York* has ever existed, that is to say, a bottomless cesspool of crime and degradation, in which daily life is made up of nothing but a stream of violent atrocities. That such a view should pass uncriticized has a great deal to do with how a section of the middle class intelligentsia views the contemporary inner-city population. Moreover, no doubt filmmakers and critics alike are guided by the conception that the fouler and more degraded the material, the closer one is to "reality."

One loses track of the sordid violence in the film, between the organized criminality of Bill the Butcher and the assorted thieves and cutthroats in the neighborhood, the "spectator sports" (bare-knuckle boxing and a gruesome fight between rats and a dog) and the everyday, random violence (including the clash between the two volunteer fire companies, who allow a home to burn to the ground while they dispute the right to put it out—the house is meanwhile ransacked by local residents).

Scorsese's film was inspired by journalist Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York*, published in the 1920s. Indeed the filmmaker claims to have been "obsessed" with the book since he first read it in 1970. Novelist Kevin Baker, who has written a novel based on the draft riots (*Paradise Alley*), has commented: "Was the Five Points really so bad? Those who know it at all today know it chiefly through *The Gangs of New York*, Herbert Asbury's 1927 collection of rollicking, hair-raising (and often fanciful) tales of old New York, or through the superb, impressionistic sketches in Luc Sante's *Low Life*.. Both works have considerable merit, yet neither goes to much trouble to sort out Five Points lore from hard, historical fact."

Asbury's book is a mixture of fact, anecdote and tall tale. He asserts, for example, that the most notorious of the Bowery Boys gang stood "eight feel tall" with hands "as large as the hams of a Virginia hog," wore a hat that measured "more than two feet across" and "during the hot months ... went about with a great fifty gallon keg of ale dangling from his belt in lieu of a canteen." And this is not the only "fanciful" passage in the work.

In other words, a considerable portion of the material in the book on which Scorsese relied so heavily is apocryphal, a fact which he clearly knew. There is the element here of deliberate falsehood and misrepresentation.

Recent archaeological evidence (readily available to Scorsese) has increased the quantity of "hard, historical fact." Some 850,000 artifacts were unearthed in a block of the old Five Points neighborhood when it was selected as the site of a new courthouse in the early 1990s. After examining the objects, as well as combing through census records, city directories and insurance company data, a team of historians and scientists—according to a 1996 *Village Voice* article by J.A. Lobbia ("Slum Lore")—reached the conclusion "that Five Points was anything but a depraved quarter populated exclusively by perps and victims; instead, they say, it was a vibrant community and the birthplace of working-class life."

Lobbia continues, "More at odds with images of Five Points inhabitants as thieves and beggars is information about work life. Census records and the directories show that most Five Points residents worked on the docks or in local factories making carriages, umbrellas, looking glasses, shoes, segar [cigar] boxes, and furniture, or in the fast-developing ready-made clothing industry.... Quantities of buttons, needles, and an array of fabrics are among the artifacts that suggest the prevalence of tailors and home piece workers.... As for personal health and cleanliness—attributes that were supposedly lacking in Five Points—there are medicine bottles, syringes used for hygiene, hair combs, and toothbrushes, including one with a handle inscribed 'Extra Fine Paris France.'" (The lives and fates of factory workers, it should be noted, have never aroused the slightest interest in Scorsese. On the other hand, his fixation with gangsters and psychopaths is unwavering, and more than a little disturbing.)

In any event, even if the historical veracity of every incident in *Gangs of New York* were to be established, there is still the matter of the filmmaker's attitude. He has adopted the right-wing tabloid journalist's approach to urban life: sensational, vulgar and heavily weighted toward blaming the poor for their wickedness. The emphasis in the film is not on the social conditions in the neighborhood, on the level of exploitation, on the poverty, but on the almost gleeful and willful viciousness of the residents. As Lobbia notes, "Personal corruption did not account for poverty; depressions, low wages [the average monthly wage for men was $38; women and children made far less], seasonal layoffs, and outlandish rents did. Epidemics of cholera did not erupt because the souls of Five Points tenants were lacking; they erupted because city sanitation was inadequate."

The draft riots of 1863

Scorsese's treatment of the draft riots is no more satisfying. The bloody outburst of violence had both economic and political roots. Conscription was enacted by Congress in March 1863. It was vehemently attacked by the Democratic Party, the section of the American bourgeoisie that opposed a resolute struggle against slavery. According to Civil War historian James McPherson, in *Battle Cry of Freedom*, "Democratic newspapers hammered at the theme that the draft would force white

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working men to fight for the freedom of blacks who would come north and take away their jobs."

The recently arrived Irish immigrants in New York were particularly susceptible to the Democrats' propaganda, to which they were directly and continuously subjected. The Irish were at the bottom rung of the social ladder in New York and other cities, having largely pushed out black labor by accepting lower wages. Indeed they were sometimes treated worse than free blacks, with employers noting in their job advertisements "any country or color except Irish." The great economic anxiety that this condition engendered (many had fled from the terrible potato famines in Ireland) was deliberately whipped up and played upon by demagogues. McPherson also notes that "Numerous strikes had left a bitter legacy, none more than a longshoreman's walkout in June 1863 when black stevedores under police protection took the place of striking Irishmen."

The ability of individuals to buy their way out of the draft for $300 (equivalent to a year's wages) encouraged the Democrats and their supporters to denounce the struggle against the Confederacy as a "rich man's fight, but a poor man's war." This argument is repeated uncritically in *Gangs of New York*. However, McPherson points out that the claim is not supported by the facts. Studies of conscription in New York and Ohio, for instance, "have found virtually no correlation between wealth and commutation." In regard to the social backgrounds of white Union soldiers as a whole, he writes, "it seems likely that the only category significantly under-represented would be unskilled workers." The struggle against slavery attracted self-sacrificing layers from every social class and ethnic group, including the Irish immigrants themselves, of whom some 150,000 joined the Union army.

Scorsese's film portrays the draft riots as the quasi-legitimate expression of popular discontent (the director likens them in interviews to the anti-Vietnam war protest movement!), albeit colored by racism, rather than as an outburst of political reaction, the product of economic misery and appeals to the basest sentiments. This is a dishonest, reactionary populism, which sets aside the small matter of the revolutionary, world-historical dimensions of the Civil War. For all intents and purposes, the film is hostile to the Northern cause. (When Bill the Butcher, a brute, but a "man of principle," shoots at a portrait of Lincoln, this might be interpreted as an act of legitimate social protest.)

One would be led by the film to believe that "class consciousness" and political protest are associated with bestial behavior. In fact, the principal target of the New York rioters was not the rich *per se*, but draft offices and federal property, black people and those who employed them, Republican newspapers and the homes of leading Republicans and abolitionists, i.e., the most progressive political forces. Eleven blacks were lynched or otherwise murdered during the riots; at least 84 rioters were eventually killed by the Union troops called in to quell the uprising. (Interestingly, McPherson observes in *The Struggle for Equality* that "A more kindly spirit toward colored people began to manifest itself in New York in the weeks and months after the draft riots," and that one consequence was the integration of the entire public transportation system in the city.)

Disgraceful film

Gangs of New York is a disgraceful film from every point of view. Scorsese has been considering violence in American life for 30 years, a subject about which he no doubt feels strongly. However, in the absence of a historical and social perspective, he has not shed much light on the problem. Scorsese has identified brutality over and over again, sometimes realistically, sometimes not, and graphically portrayed it at length, but he has never investigated its roots in social relations, in class society. The filmmaker, whose early ambition it was to become a Catholic priest, seems satisfied to view violence as imbedded in human nature. His response to the phenomenon seems equal parts horror and fascination.

For a film director of a certain type, one with both artistic and "popular" ambitions, a consequence of feeling deeply about man's inhumanity to man and yet considering it inherent in the human condition might be a continual shift between a kind of forced cheerfulness, making desperate efforts to treat violence as the "colorful" stuff of life, and a profound misanthropy, exhibiting only disgust for this degraded species. Both moods seem present in *Gangs of New York*, with the latter inevitably predominant.

Just as pernicious is the conception, advanced by some of the film's admirers, that Scorsese's work accurately portrays the emergence of modern America. Scott in the *Times* writes, "It is not the usual triumphalist story of moral progress and enlightenment, but rather a blood-soaked revenger's tale, in which the modern world arrives in the form of a line of soldiers firing into a crowd.... Like the old order, the new one is riven by class resentment, racism and political hypocrisy, attributes that change their form at every stage of history but that seem to be as embedded in human nature as the capacity for decency, solidarity and courage." *Slate*'s Edelstein asserts that the film "mixes elemental stories of love and revenge with a vision of the larger historical forces that shaped the capitalist society we know today." Roger Ebert, in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, observes that "It is instructive to be reminded that modern America was forged not in quiet rooms by great men in wigs, but in the streets, in the clash of immigrant groups, in a bloody Darwinian struggle."

The notion that American society emerged out of mindless violence and squalor, "in the streets," is a reactionary and anti-intellectual distortion of history. In fact, the US experienced what is now referred to as its Renaissance during the 1840s and 1850s, when figures such as Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Dickinson, Whitman and Stowe all produced their most influential works. This list alone, notwithstanding the fact that many of these writers did not know success at the time (or even, in Dickinson's case, make her work public), testifies to a high level of culture and literacy. It was within this remarkable culture, influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers, German philosophy and utopian socialism, that many of the ideological foundations of the Union cause in the Civil War, the second American Revolution, were laid down.

America society in the pre-revolutionary 1850s was extraordinarily susceptible to progressive thought. As James McPherson has noted, in *For Cause and Comrades*, "Civil War soldiers lived in the world's most politicized and democratic country in the mid-nineteenth century. They had come of age in the 1850s when highly charged partisan and ideological debates consumed the American polity. A majority of them had voted in the election of 1860, the most heated and momentous election in American history. When they enlisted, many of them did so for patriotic and ideological reasons—to shoot as they had voted, so to speak."

Furthermore, the chatter about "class resentment" and the "larger historical forces that shaped the capitalist society we know today," when applied to *Gangs of New York* is quite "left" sounding, but entirely muddled and misleading. This tacit endorsement of Scorsese's fascination with corruption and filth is bound up with the notion, so prevalent today in certain quarters, that to be "radical" is to have the bleakest possible notion of humanity and society, to ascribe to human beings under any and all historical conditions the worst possible motives. This is sometimes described as exploring the "dark side," or "the underbelly" of American life, as being "unsparing" and "challenging conventional wisdom." In fact, it is no such thing.

The real implication of this view is that the selfishness, greed and racism

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of humanity as a whole (including its suffering portion), not definite, *capitalist* socioeconomic relations, have brought about the current state of affairs, that people are essentially unworthy and one has no obligation to struggle against existing conditions because they are, after all, inherent in the human condition. This cynical stance is known as justifying today's swinishness by yesterday's swinishness.

The various critics, thanks in part to Scorsese's skewed vision of history, have the events turned on their head. The draft riots did not usher in the modern era or symbolize its birth. Rather they embodied everything that was backward and selfish in the population, inevitably encouraged and sanctioned by the Democratic Party (whose association with the American working class has ever had tragic and disastrous consequences).

In reality, the modern era in the US was brought into being by a social-revolutionary struggle, the Civil War, a titanic blow for equality and democracy. That the war and its outcome never went beyond the bounds of bourgeois property relations was historically inevitable, but the liberating conflict was a moment in that revolutionary continuum which includes the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, struggles waged consciously by the working class against the bourgeoisie. After the freeing of the slaves and the dismantling of the slavocracy, Marx proclaimed: " *Never* has such a gigantic transformation taken place so rapidly."

A Union victory over the Confederacy would have been far more difficult, almost unthinkable, following Scorsese's line of reasoning: that the war was thoroughly unpopular and the population in the Northern states widely uninterested or hostile to the ending of slavery. The more farsighted elements in the Union army (and in the Northern population as a whole) were conscious, to varying degrees, that the eradication of chattel slavery corresponded to the general interests of human progress and were willing to pay the ultimate price in that cause. How else can one explain the 80 percent vote among Union soldiers for Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864, following the Emancipation Proclamation and following four years of bloody conflict, with all the misleadership, incompetence and outright treachery exhibited by sections of the Northern high command? The notion that *ideas* played a material role in enabling the Union army to overcome adversity and persevere is entirely foreign to Scorsese and the majority of critics.

In the general media celebration of *Gangs of New York* there are various elements. Intellectual corruption plays a role, as the relationship between the film studios and certain media outlets becomes more and more intimate. It may be virtually impossible at present, for example, for a major New York film critic to suggest that a work by Scorsese, produced by Harvey Weinstein and Miramax at a cost of $115 million, is a travesty. Too much is at stake for all concerned.

There is also an element of wishful thinking. To acknowledge that Scorsese—whose film's release is one of the major events of the year in the American cinema—is not a master filmmaker, that he is not even a competent one, that his ideas are regressive and third-rate, that his own work has degenerated from its levels in the 1970s, would be to admit to a cultural crisis whose implications certain critics do not care to contemplate.

Still others celebrate the Scorsese work because it reflects their own self-serving and fashionably contemptuous view of humankind and the American people in particular. The filthiness they see, however, is not in impoverished neighborhoods, but in their own mirrors.

In any event, both the film and its critical reception express a level of extraordinary social and intellectual disorientation which ought not to go unnoticed or unanswered. Other voices and views, we are convinced, will emerge under conditions of a maturing social crisis.

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